

Ben Nighthorse Campbell
Chairman, Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing
To Receive the Views of the Secretary of Interior on Indian Matters

February 28, 2001

Today the Committee on Indian Affairs meets to receive the views of the recently-confirmed Secretary of the Interior on matters pertaining to Indian Tribal affairs.

We are fortunate to welcome the Honorable Gale Norton to her first hearing before this Committee and indeed to her first Congressional hearing since being confirmed by the United States Senate in January.

Welcome Madam Secretary.

As the Members know well, Secretary Norton is no stranger to Indian issues. As Attorney General for the State of Colorado, Gale Norton had in-depth experience with both the Ute Mountain Ute and the Southern Ute Indian Tribes on a whole variety of issues: gaming negotiations; oil and gas development; water settlements; state sales taxes; environmental matters; and many others.

On Indian issues of national concern, then-Attorney General Norton appeared before this Committee in 1997 and again in 1998 testifying on legislation to reduce tobacco use among Native Americans and in particular among Native children.

As my colleagues know, I was a proud sponsor and supporter of Gale Norton's candidacy to be Interior Secretary and I believe that her background and experience will put the Department, Indian Tribes, and our Nation in a good stead over the next four years.

The Department and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) are the primary federal agencies in carrying out the government-to-government relationship between the U.S. and Indian Tribal governments.

Your job as Trustee, Secretary Norton, will be difficult to say the least. The issues we need to address are fundamental: improving educational opportunities for Indian youngsters; making sure Native communities are safe from crime and liveable; resolving the national disgrace of Indian trust funds; and bringing jobs and real hope to millions of Native people across the nation.

We have made progress on many of these issues but much needs to be done.

Madam Secretary, you have inherited a hell of a mess when it comes to Indian trust funds reforms.

I want to describe why trust reform has been the most frustrating challenge for me since becoming Chairman of the Committee.

After many hours of hearings and endless GAO briefings, various proposals were made to help the Department reform its management of Indian trust funds and assets.

Sen. Murkowski and I introduced a bill to liberalize investment opportunities for Indian assets. The former Administration not only opposed the bill, *but lobbied against it!*

I proposed giving more authority to the Special Trustee. The Administration *opposed it*.

I proposed establishing a temporary "Indian Trust Resolution Corporation" to do for Indian accounts what the Resolution Trust Corporation did for the failed Savings and Loans back in the 1980s. Guess what? The Administration *opposed it*.

We may be seeing light in this tunnel however. Last Friday the Court of Appeals for the D. C. Circuit upheld Judge Lamberth's decision that the Federal government has failed in fulfilling its obligations to Indians and that a full historical accounting is due the Indian Plaintiffs.

I want you to know Secretary Norton that you have an ally in me and certainly an ally in this Committee as you try and resolve the trust funds mess and bring this sad chapter to an end.

In conclusion, through close consultation between Tribal leaders, this Administration, and the Congress, I believe that we can do what so badly needs to be done in Native communities and I pledge to you my support and that of this Committee in accomplishing our mutual goals.

With that, I would ask our esteemed Vice Chairman, Sen. Inouye, if he has an opening statement.